

Chicago Sun Times, November 4, 2005

Disturbed by a Pentagon policy that limits gifts to military members to \$20, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk on Thursday garnered Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's support of legislation to exempt wounded soldiers from the cap.

"Gifts from a grateful nation should not be limited to folded flags," said Kirk (R-Ill.), a Naval Reserve officer. "Within two weeks, this issue will be solved. So by the time we have a lot of gift-giving . . . whatever Army lawyer who announced this policy will be corrected by the United States Congress."

Kirk sent Rumsfeld a letter last week signed by 16 members of Congress denouncing the policy requiring soldiers to obtain written authorization from military lawyers before accepting gifts exceeding \$20. The policy has delayed many from receiving needed gifts -- such as phone cards and wheelchairs. The reform will be attached to legislation scheduled to be enacted by Congress before Thanksgiving.

The Defense Department's long-standing gift cap was designed to prevent military officials from being bribed for defense contracts. It did not apply to enlisted military members until 1993. Wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center were recently warned that if they accepted gifts of more than \$20, they might be violating federal law and be subject to disciplinary action, including a court-martial, Kirk said.

Limits threatened conference

The gift ban almost derailed a conference in Chicago this week for wounded soldiers recovering at U.S. Army hospitals. The "Chicago Wounded Heroes R&R Event" allows amputees and burned soldiers from the Iraq war a chance to get out and be entertained by Chicago businesses and city officials.

On Thursday, the soldiers were outfitted with new suits to fit their new prostheses and injuries. The suits were supplied by the Men's Wearhouse in Norridge and the Chicago area Wounded Soldiers nonprofit. The gifts were approved by the Defense Department after negotiations with state officials.